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### Is Hip-Hop Dead?

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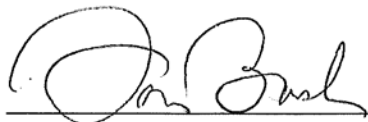
Thesis/Project Working Title: Is Hip Hop Dead?

Description:

With the popularization and proliferation of the subgenre Mumble Rap, many individuals within the culture and industry of Hip-Hop say that the genre is dying. They argue that artists no longer use their platform to create lyrical based messages and now are more focused with commercial success, copying this new wave of sound that has become popular. While these arguments have validity, they neglect the various artists on the cutting edge of the genre who are creating new music and subgenres through fusion with other popular categories of music. Additionally, there are modern artists that try to revive and expound on the work of past generations of rap still to do this day. Rap is not dead but it is undergoing a process of transition; where this will take the genre is still to be seen, however at this time every facet and iteration of Hip-Hop has a place to flourish within the overall industry.

Faculty Advisor/Reader

I agree to direct the Honors Thesis/Project as described above.



Name Advisor



Name Co-Advisor/Reader

**TITLE**

IS HIP-HOP DEAD?

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation with Honors**

by

Tim Kinoti

May 2018

**Thesis written by**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
I. INTRODUCTION	6
II. THE BEGINNING 1970s	11
III. GOLDEN ERA OF RAP 1980S and 1990S	18
IV. THE MODERN ERA	25
V. CLOSING	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY	33

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**Introduction**

“Sky is the limit and you know that you keep on

Just keep on pressing on

Sky is the limit and you know that you can have

What you want, be what you want

Sky is the limit and you know that you keep on

Just keep on pressing on

Sky is the limit and you know that you can have

What you want, be what you want

Have what you want, be what you want”

-*Sky's The Limit*- The Notorious B.I.G. 1997

Since its birth, the Hip-Hop genre and the culture influenced by it, has housed the history and stories of, pain, jubilation, victory, shortcomings, debauchery and hope in the African American community in the United States for decades. The genres growth and proliferation has been a journey of contention but now Hip-Hop has reached a magnitude of social importance and relevancy never before imagined. As a result, with the help of generations of artists and the progression and evolutions of the genre, it was reported as of this year that Hip-Hop/R&B is now the, “Dominant Genre In The U.S.” surpassing Rock and Roll (McIntyre). What is particularly interesting is the level to which Hip-Hop permeates society from Daytime and Cable Television, to Social Media and Internet Culture, to even advertisement and fashion. This in large part is due to the mainstream success the genre has been able to cultivate.

A multitude of factors contributed to the widespread success of the genre but by far the most important was the freedom and platform African-Americans and minority artists were given, to say whatever they wanted in an unadulterated manor. This opportunity gave millions of historically marginalized communities a voice that spoke to their genuine Black-American experience. For example, during the racial turbulence of the 1990s centered on the “Crack Epidemic” and Law Enforcement brutality, artists had a voice to share their stories and perspectives (Kembrew 142). The stories that were connected to the drug and gang culture were vulgar and gruesome but they stood as a direct and real reflection of the time. Sentiments within Hip-Hop music of the 1980s and 1990s, like “Fuck the Police” by N.W.A., provided the initial tone and overall message of the genre. This message



encompassed themes of defiance against the systems in place, introspective lyrical storytelling of the black experience and ultimately black excellence. For Hip-Hop historians and enthusiasts, the brutal honesty and conviction found in this eras music served as the bedrock and blueprint for what Hip-Hop should represent.

As the genre progressed through the decades, mainstream success influenced a change in the underlying tone of themes produced within the content. The commercial industry demand for Hip-Hop changed many of the original themes found in the genre, replacing them with content to serve a wider consumer demographic (Stapleton 220). This shift was primarily done by fusing Hip-Hop with trending Pop, which paved the way for many artist such as Drake, Chance the Rapper, Migos and others that have meshed the two genres. While lyricism based on sharing a message can still be found from certain artists, the modern wave of Hip-Hop is found within the subgenre entitled “Mumble Rap”. This category is characterized as a style of rap that prioritizes repetition, harmony, adlibs, and bass heavy production over bars to create a vibe or catchy song (Genius 2017).

This change has further propelled the success of the industry, however it has diluted the hard-hitting lyricism and content of early generations of rap. This transformation has sparked a prevailing sentiment amongst the older generation of rap enthusiasts that Hip-Hop has lost its relevance because it has lost its core message. Additionally, as millennial crowds fixate on this new wave of music, and more and more new artists mimic the stylistic sound, many see the future of Hip-Hop as bleak.

Regardless, this mainstream transition has given artists the opportunity to diversify Hip-Hop as a genre. While Reality Rap, Gangsta Rap, and Boom-Bap Rap of the 1980s and 1990s laid the foundation of the Hip- Hop genre, it only captured portions of the Black and minority experience. Mainstream success has allowed for further creativity and freedom within the artistry of Hip Hop. As a result, every shade and complexity of the Black experience has been given room to be represented within the genre (Morgan, Marcyliena 137). Just as Black-American's are not a monolith, Hip-Hop is no longer a vessel exclusively for awakening social-political consciousness. In addition, this creativity has increased the overall quality of the music being produced. Hip-Hop has given artists such as Kanye West, Tyler The Creator, Travis Scott, XXXTentacion, and others the room to reimagine the sound of the genre creating hard hitting rap while fusing together multiple genres, utilizing orchestras, sonic experimentation through technology, and branching outside of common themes usually found in rap.

Cumulatively, Hip-Hop's has allowed artists to convey their living narrative and history of the African-American and minority experience in a way that recognizes, challenges, and changes society's conceptual understanding of the black body. Furthermore, by looking at specific artists or at the industry as a whole through the course of time, we can see the progression and history of that African-American experience, told by members within the culture itself. As a result, the music has empowered listeners but also created industries within entertainment such as radio, television, movies, touring, production, writing, and much more that have created careers for countless black people (Watson). The mainstream industry

success that Hip-Hop has enjoyed has been the driving cause for this progress, even though it has diluted the overall content produced within the genre; straying away from lyricism and intellectual themes towards more consumer oriented content. While this is the case, the success of the genre has allowed artists new levels of self-expression, which has lead to the wide array of creativity now seen propelling the new waves of the Hip-Hop industry. This thesis argues that holistically that Hip-Hop is comparatively in a better state than that of the 1980s and 1990s. This is directly due to the limited themes found in the overall content of the genres earlier years as well as the natural cross-genre fusion and increased production that has improved the overall artistry of Hip- Hop. Naysayers would contests that the new generation of rappers that are taking the industry over, no longer respect or represent the true essence of rap and therefore, Hip-Hop is dying. I would offer that since the Hip- Hop industry has been able to support such a variety of unique styles that it is in fact stronger than it has ever been as a genre.

**The Beginning 1970s**

“I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie

To the hip hip hop and you don't stop

The rock it to the bang bang boogie

Say up jump the boogie to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat

Now, what you hear is not a test, I'm rapping to the beat

And me, the groove, and my friends are gonna try to move your feet

See I am Wonder Mike and I'd like to say 'hello' “

*-Rapper's Delight-* Sugarhill Gang 1979

The 1970s marked the creation of Hip-Hop as a sound as well as an industry. During the late 1960s going into the early 1970s, the dominant genre of music was by far Disco music in the United States. Specifically in New York, which at the time stood as a pinnacle of modern Western society, Disco was played on all the radio stations, streamed over television air waves and most importantly fueled the popular club scene and night life. On any given night, these clubs were packed with wealth celebrities, businessmen, young women, and socialites all dressed in their finest clothes dancing and singing the night away to disco tunes (Morgan, Robert). Many African-Americans and minorities also listened and grooved to disco tunes but due to social-economics in the various boroughs not many were able to enjoy the clubbing scene. This led to an underground party culture specifically among minorities in New York that was run by local Disc Jockeys who were willing to host and play music. Many times these parties were held in people's homes or in parks and featured disco music as well but DJs at the time also played Funk and Soul music like James Brown and Isaac Hayes as well as Jazz music like Gil Scott-Heron. From this underground scene Hip-Hop was born. (Morgan, Robert)

On the date of August 11, 1973 at a housing complex on 1520 Sedwick Ave. in the Bronx, the first component of rap was born through a DJ called Kool Herc (Greenburg). Dj Kool Herc and a close friend Coke La Rock were widely known for the parties they would throw in the Bronx. What differentiated them from other DJs was the records they would play and how they played them on a nightly basis.

Kool Herc would find soul and funk records like James Brown's "Ain't it Funky," skip to the breakdown portion of the song where most of the instruments would fade out except for the drums and sometimes the base, and he would loop this portion continuously creating an entirely new song. He would do this endlessly with multiple songs throughout a night giving the party a lively and popping atmosphere. After this first party word spread making it possible for DJ Kool Herc and Coke La Rock to host bigger bashes but the technique also spread to other local Disc Jockeys looking to play around with a new sound. (Kabango)

Another pioneer of Hip Hop was DJ Afrika Bambaataa. During the early 1970s, Afrika Bambaataa was heavily involved in the gang community surrounding the North Bronx area, rising up to be the leader of the Black Spades, one of the largest gangs in New York at the time. While being involved with the street life, Afrika Bambaataa also DJ-ed parties and after hearing Kool Herc's style, replicated and added his own flare and taste while spinning records (Oware). At this point, Afrika Bambaataa started to focus and take music more seriously, which forced him to leave the gang life behind him. However, through his time in these organizations he made friends with many of the leaders and members of other gangs creating an opportunistic environment. These various gangs had massive influence over street culture so through his connections Afrika Bambaataa started organizing huge events under the pretense of peace and positivity for the night. The attendees of these

celebrations were spiritedly called the Zulu Nation and have been marked as the first official underground movement of Hip-Hop. (Alridge 194)

Concurrent with DJ Kool Herc and DJ Afrika Bambaataa another local Disk Jockey was revolutionizing the music scene as well. DJ Grand Master Flash also followed along the wave Kool Herc started and began playing the break beat portion of song on loop at parties (Oware). At the time, the main equipment for playing music at these house parties was turntables and mixing boards. This made it hard to pinpoint definitive locations within a song, like the break beats, so the transitions between songs were often hectic jumbles of sound. Grand Master Flash, wanting to perfect his sound, experimented with different ways he could achieve a smoother transition. His solution was drawing on his vinyl records with a crayon the location of a solid transition point within a song as well as a mark on where the break beat of the song was as well (Greenburg). In this way Grand Master Flash could quickly and smoothly transition between songs but it also added an element never heard before. While practicing with the song markers he had drawn on his vinyls, Grand Master Flash noticed an interesting “scratching” sound made when he manually spun the vinyl either forward or backward. Additionally he could emphasize certain words or phrases by rewinding or skipping forward giving him another element to express himself creatively. For Grand Master Flash, it gave him a new and unique sound that allowed himself to differentiate his sound from other DJs popping up. With these various new techniques DJ Kool Herc, DJ Afrika Bambaataa, and DJ Grand Master

Flash established the rudimental sound of Hip Hop and as such are known to some as the Holy Trinity of the genre. (Kabango)

Up to this point the sound had been established but no one was rapping over this music in the modern traditional sense. What was prevalent were urban radio personality like Gary Bird and Franky Crocker who would introduce or end songs with very smooth rhymes and phrases during their segments that listeners gravitated to. As a result, street DJs playing parties and events would do the same or even bring a hype man to do the same slick style rhymes through transitions. Quickly this translated into individuals starting to put together rhymes that spanned the entire length of songs. It is hard to pinpoint the very first person to compose the first full-length rap as much of Hip-Hop's origin is not meticulously detailed and the first official rap record was not produced until 1979 but the first major rhythmic rap performer was DJ Hollywood who was also from New York. Influenced by Pigmeat Markham's "Here come the Judge," DJ Hollywood strung together long rhythmic rhymes that were often disjointed yet flowed with the break beats found in popular disco songs he looped (Skillz). Seeing the success of DJ Hollywood, DJ Grand Master Flash tried to piece together small raps as well and perform them while he spun records. He did not have much success trying this because he was shy while rapping, so he invited his friends to recite some rhymes while he DJ-ed. This started off as a casual routine but from there, Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five was established. Including Grand Master Flash as the official DJ, the rap group was



comprised of Mele-Mel, Kid Creole, Cowboy, Raheem, and Mr. Ness. Even though they are officially the first rap group assembled, what made them special was instead of playing at parties they exclusively played at venues and clubs.

Additionally, they created an entire concert show for people to see starting with DJ Grand Master Flash playing random popular songs for the crowd to warm up and dance to then a full performance with simple choreographed dance routines, transitions, and matching outfits when the Furious Five came onto the stage. This solidified the group as a full concert act and propelled them to touring the world alongside acts like the Jackson 5 in 1976.

After Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five started having success, rap groups began popping up everywhere in New York trying to find their own success. Groups like Funky 4, DXT, Spoonie Gee, The Treacherous Three, Fearless 4, The Crash Crew and many others started popping up. This caused a sense competition between the new groups forming as there were only so many venues to play and crowds were hard to draw. Of these new groups the two that were the most successful were the Fantastic Five, and Grand Master Caz and the Cold Crush Brothers (Kabango). In 1979, hip-hop was starting to build a community, mostly underground in New York, with a few groups and acts prospering but the genre was still very much in its infancy. This in large part was due to no recorded songs being available in vinyl or commercial to be played by radio or distributed in general. That was until August of 1979 with the release of "Rappers Delight." Sylvia

Robinson, the founder of All Platinum Records, was a local New York music executive who had grown up in the music business as a teen singer. After great success in the late 60s and early 70s her company falls on hard times to where Robison is looking for one last ditch effort in reviving her label. One evening while attending a birthday party in Harlem with a friend, Robinson hears a native DJ playing the party and instantly knows this is what she needs. After a bit of searching Robinson finds three rappers Master Gee, Big Bank Hank, and Wonder Mike to make up the group known as The Sugarhill Gang who record and release "Rappers Delight." Their rap single shot up the charts making it to the top 40 on the Billboard Hot 100 list and spurring not only commercial success for the Sugarhill Gang but also mainstream recognition and ears (Simpson). The famous introduction to the song, "I said a hip hop, Hippy to the hippie, the hip, hip a hop, and you don't stop," has been sampled and reused in countless current music. The song served as the first commercial and industry success for the genre. Though this era served as the birth of Hip-Hop not much substantive content had been created. In fact, critics believed that rap was a passing fad that would only last momentarily due to its lack of musical integrity (Dimitriadis 33). The genre had yet to find a voice or niche within the industry besides mainstream party songs for the club scenes of New York. Regardless, the foundation had been set for artist to use their music as a platform.

**Golden Era of Rap 1980s and 1990s:**

“Life is parallel to Hell, but I must maintain  
And be prosperous, though we live dangerous  
Cops could just arrest me, blamin' us: we're held like hostages  
It's only right that I was born to use mics  
And the stuff that I write is even tougher than dykes  
I've taken rappers to a new plateau  
Through rap slow, my rhyming is a vitamin held without a capsule  
The smooth criminal on beat breaks  
Never put me in your box if your shit eats tapes  
The city never sleeps, full of villains and creeps  
That's where I learned to do my hustle, had to scuffle with freaks  
I'm an addict for sneakers  
20's of buddha and bitches with beepers  
In the streets I can greet ya, about blunts I teach ya  
Inhale deep like the words of my breath  
I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death  
I lay puzzle as I backtrack to earlier times  
Nothing's equivalent to the New York state of mind”

-N.Y. State of Mind- Nas 1994

While the 1970s played the crucial role of forming the sound that would become Hip-hop, the overall genre lacked a message or cohesive themes that would serve as the backbone of the sound. Entering the 1980s and 1990s artist began to realize this new art form was creating a platform, which could be utilized to vocalize much more than just party anthems. As this became more evident, artists started to change collectively to “reality” based lyricism where everyday hardships, triumphs, and existence was used to paint the content created (Philips). This wave inspired songs of rebellion against the system that oppressed while also empowering those living within such condition. This change of sound came to define Hip-Hop as a vessel for entertainment but also as an opportunity for solidarity within African-American audiences. As a result, many believe that this era represented the “Golden Age” of rap because the genre had a clear overall message. (Kuttner 533)

The journey that began this transformation of the Hip-Hop sound started with a rap group known as Public Enemy. While attending Delphi University in Georgia, students Chuck D and MC DJ Flavor Flav hosted an on campus radio station named WBAU. Between playing popular radio songs, the duo would sneak on their own records they had secretly making through the radio-recording studio. As their radio show grew in popularity, Rick Rubin a music producer for the up-and-coming record label Def Jam Recordings heard a few sets off their radio show and reached out for a CD demo to potentially offer the rap duo a contract. Originally Chuck D did not want to sign to Def Jam in the fear that he would be forced to make records that appealed to popular culture, meaning he would have to water down his lyrics. After long conversation with Rick Ruben and label executive Russell Simmons on lyrical

branding and marketing strategies, Public Enemy was created (Stacey). In 1989, they released their first single entitled *Fight the Power*. Amongst lyrics that criticized police brutality and poverty, lyrics such as “Elvis was a hero to most / But he never meant shit to me / Straight up racist, the sucker was / Simple and plain.” Knowing he would reach an audience comprised of mainly minorities, Chuck D used the third verse of the song to relay a sentiment to the greater populous that many non-white Americans already felt. The reaction to the song was divided but with the help of film director Spike Lee who filmed the music video for the song that incorporated scenes from his movie *Do The Right Thing*. As a result, the song sold over 500,000 copies in its first year and became a rallying cry for the youth during a Ronald Reagan presidency that was igniting the “war on drugs,” ostracizing patients within the AIDS epidemic and ignoring racial tensions. One journalist wrote, “Public Enemy's explosive 1989 hit single brought hip-hop to the mainstream—and brought revolutionary anger back to pop” (Warrell). This song set a new precedent for artists within the genre. This song proved that Hip-hop could be a platform where artists could speak their truth to the masses, and regardless of the disparagement some may have, the support from minority consumers carried the message onward commercially. Public Enemy’s message sparked the essence of the polarizing and defiant era of the 1990s.

Entering the 1990s on the West Coast of the country, primarily Los Angeles California, gang culture predominantly perpetuated the proliferation of rap. Small disordered gangs turned into massive criminal enterprises with the introduction of crack cocaine in 1984. When gangs realized the commercial

opportunity that crack presented, a dramatic increase of gang related violence also ensued (Felker). Members of these groups would openly fight for control of certain areas that other groups considered their territory to sell crack. This caused an influx of weapons, especially guns, into the South Central region as money from crack flowed in and fighting continued to control ideal distribution areas.

Consequently, police activity within these communities rose as well in the hopes of combatting these gangs by any means possible. This created harsh environments filled with violence, mainly surrounding the minority communities they affected.

However, the popularity surrounding the consumption and selling of crack, perpetuated a system where gangs and their members were idolized in certain communities because of the financial profits being made (Quinn). One such rapper influenced by this tide in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles was Ice-T. Ice-T was never officially inducted into a certain gang, but due to the friends and community he grew up around, he found himself associated and friends with members within The Crips. While hanging with friends who were also active gang members, he would recite "Crip Rhymes," short lyrical verses that rhymed with Crip, to entertain his posse. Instead of the party tone that Hip-Hop was currently embarrassing, these rhymes depicted graphic but real realities of gang culture (Van Hellemon and Densley). Ice-T took this concept and released his first song entitled "6 N The Mornin" in 1987, that sported lyrics such as,

"6 in the morning, police at my door/Fresh Adidas squeak across the  
bathroom floor/Out my back window I make a escape/Don't even get a  
chance to grab my old school tape/Mad with no music, but happy cause

free/And the streets to a player is the place to be/Got a knot in my/pocket,  
weighing at least a grand/Gold on my neck, my pistols close at hand” (Ice-T).

This song single-handedly brought the concept and theme of “Reality Rap or Gangsta Rap” to the genre of Hip-Hop. Ice-T unapologetically embraced his affiliation with gang culture and vividly illustrated the drugs and violence surrounding it in a way that did not denounce or critique its morality but presented it as a reality.

Inspired by this new sound as well as changing tides within communities, techno DJs also began to adapt and mimic the hostile and aggressive demeanor of Los Angeles. One such DJ, who was once apart of the World Class Wreckin Cru, led the propagation of this gangsta rap sound was none other than Dr. Dre. With fellow friend and producer DJ Yella, Dr. Dre started transitioning from techno beats to slower, more pounding beats that could be used to tell stories using lyrics. Dre and Yella decided to recruit the best rappers within their community to take the beats they made and turn them into full songs that followed Ice-T’s blueprint, portraying their life experiences in Los Angeles. They recruited local friends Arabian Prince, MC Ren, and Ice Cube to join their group while another friend Eazy-E loaned them the money they needed for the production of the music. As a collective, they named their group Niggaz Wit Attitudes (N.W.A.). With the help of music manager Jerry Heller, Eazy-E established Ruthless Records and produced and released N.W.A’s first studio album in 1988 entitled *Straight Outta Compton*. This album redefined the trajectory of the Hip-Hop genre with songs like “Gangsta Gangsta” and “Fuck tha Police.” The album was released to critical acclaim and went on to sell over 3

million records but the lyrics and messages within were met with high scrutiny. Writer David Mills of The Washington Post wrote, "The hard-core street rappers defend their violent lyrics as a reflection of 'reality.' But for all the gunshots they mix into their music, rappers rarely try to dramatize that reality — a young man flat on the ground, a knot of lead in his chest, pleading as death slowly takes him in" (LaBlanc). Many viewed this music as the direct cause of violence within drug infested communities. Additionally police departments across the country called and even the FBI called for the censorship of "Fuck tha Police," as they deemed it dangerous. However, for the African-American audiences that were fans of N.W.A., the song projected a sentiment that was already deeply felt by so many people. For many, life was riddled by constant harassment, subjugation, and even death at the hands of Law Enforcement for seemingly just being a minority (Perry). These sentiments were validated in 1991 with the gruesome beating of Rodney Glen King at the hands of Los Angeles Police Department. Even with footage from local new station KTLA 5 that clearly showed multiple officers stomping, beating and taunting Mr. King, not a single law enforcement agent implicated was convicted of any wrong doing. Hours following the acquittal on April 29, 1992, Los Angeles was flung into civil unrest and rioting (Sides 593). This case showed the American public the injustice faced by minorities on a daily basis that sparked the creation of songs like "Fuck tha Police."

Ice-T and NWA sparked an era of social conscience and brutal honesty that prevailed throughout the 1990s. Others artists would rise to superstardom building on these themes to continue this narrative within the Hip-Hop community.



Artists like Nas carried the mantle in New York in the 1990s with songs such as “It Ain’t Hard to Tell” that relayed his story of living around gang and drug culture in New York as a youth and young adult. Jay-Z’s song “99 Problems” paints a vivid picture of the ill interaction between law enforcement and African-Americans that was routine. Other great artists of the 1990s such as 2 Pac and The Notorious B.I.G also created albums like *Me Against the World* and *Ready to Die*, respectively, along with other catalogues of great music surrounding these same themes of African-American struggle, gang culture, black empowerment, and hope. Though these themes served as the bedrock of the genre, many artists within this era did not venture very far from these fundamental topics.

**The Modern Era**

“For what's money without happiness?  
Or hard times without the people you love  
Though I'm not sure what's 'bout to happen next  
I asked for strength from the Lord up above  
Cause I've been strong so far, But I can feel my grip loosening  
Quick, do something before you lose it for good  
Get it back and use it for good  
And touch the people how you did like before I'm tired of living with demons  
Cause they always inviting more Think being broke was better  
Now I don't mean that phrase with no disrespect  
To all my niggas out there living in debt, Cashing minimal checks  
Turn on the TV see a nigga Rolex  
And fantasize about a life with no stress I mean this shit sincerely  
And that's a nigga who was once in your shoes  
Living with nothin' to lose, I hope one day you hear me  
Always gon' be a bigger house somewhere, but nigga feel me  
Long as the people in that motherfucker love you dearly  
Always gon' be a whip that's better than the one you got  
Always gon' be some clothes, That's fresher than the ones you rock  
Always gon' be a bitch that's badder out there on the tours  
But you ain't never gon' be happy till you love yours”

*-Love Yourz- J. Cole 2014*

Nearly 40 years after party DJs in the small Borough of Bronx birthed the sound and style that that would shape an urban genre, the Hip-Hop capital spending power is now over \$1 trillion dollar (Simmons Lathan Media Group). Each year the industry generates more than \$10 billion dollars, surpassing Rock and Roll (\$ 9.2 billion dollars) as the most consumed genre within U.S. music markets (Hugh McIntyre). Each year the genre is responsible for 40% of nation wide album sales as well as 29% of on demand streaming within North American markets (Forbes). As a result, artistry within the music, branding, and performing has elevated drastically. Artists have a high bar to reach when competing for excellence amongst their own peers. As this progression occurs, Hip-Hop has begun fusing across genres to make new styles of music. Multitudes of subgenres within Hip-Hop have arisen in this manor where artists are allowed the freedom to create and experiment freely. This evolution has lead to the modern era of rap, which is filled with complexity.

Not everyone within the culture of Hip-Hop likes the trajectory of this contemporary era, mainly due to the popularization of pop centered rap. Artists like Lil Yachty, Lil Uzi Vert, Playboi Carti, Trippe Redd and others have reached record-breaking success pushing a new wave of rap entitled “Mumble Rap.” By nature, the name of this subgenre is derogatory and is often not used by artists that are labeled as such, however sonically many of the artists sound similar. Songs of this classification often rely heavily on loud bass production from electronic drums and sharp rolling snares to create upbeat and bouncy rhythm. Unlike 80s and 90s Hip-Hop where production was left sparse so audiences could here hear the lyrics of the rapper, in “Mumble Rap” production usually dominates. As a result, it can be hard to

hear what lyrists are trying to say. “Mumble Rap” originates from 2000s Atlanta “Trap Music.” Artists such as T.I., Jeezy, and Gucci Mane popularized melodic hood raps that vividly illustrated stories concerning drugs and gang activity involving a centralized house (Trap). This name stood as a metaphor, for the ethical and legal dangers an individual put themselves into when drug dealing in such houses in poor urban communities. Following its creation, other artists from Atlanta like the Migos, Future, Young Thug, 2 Chainz, 21 Savage, and others infused melodic pop into “Trap Music” laying the foundation for the blockbuster mainstream success of “Mumble Rap.”

The content within this new subgenre is not what is particularly alarming as the creation and proliferation of new subgenres happens frequently. The debate around “Mumble Rap” lies in how quickly the subgenre has taken over the majority of content being released by new artists. No official data has been compiled to quantify what bulk of the modern industry is made up of “Mumble Rap” however a good marker for the industry is *XXL* (magazine) *Freshman Class* cover. Started in 2007, *XXL* takes this annual issue to highlight ten new Hip-Hop artists that are set to be big entertainers in the coming years. The editors of *XXL* choose nine of the ten artists selected for the cover, with the tenth being nominated by a nationwide poll. Though the selection of these artists is highly politicized, by looking at the 130 to 150 artists that submit application for recognition, one can see music trends in the newer generation. In 2012, roughly 13% of all the candidates created music that would be stylistically characterized as “Mumble Rap.” After the release of songs like *Tony Montana* by Future in 2012 and *Versace* by the Migos in 2013, these numbers

jumped. By 2016 nearly 36% of applicants were using this same style with the percent steadily increasing. (XXL) Critics of “Mumble Rap” see this as a foreboding trend for the genre. If the emphasis of most new rappers is no longer lyrical based messages and instead catchy pop based songs, where is rap heading as an industry?

Though the logic is correct, this perspective fails to view the genre holistically. Multitudes of other subgenres exist in rap, all carrying their own mantle. Some of the most exciting new music being created in society can be found in the alternative subgenres new artists are creating within Hip-Hop. Artists such as XXXTentacion, Jaden Smith, Childish Gambino, Tyler the Creator, Anderson Paak and others have utilized technology and resources to fuse full orchestras with jazz, pop, and even country and folk with 808 synthesizers to create medleys of music hard to categorize. Furthermore, as Hip-Hop becomes a global entity, it has begun incorporating foreign styles into the sound creating new and unique cross-cultural fusions. For example, in his recent playlist entitled *More Life*, Drake expanded his range, incorporating dancehall rhythm from Jamaica with the “Grime Boy” rap style found abroad in the United Kingdom. For some, this album represents a musical collaboration connecting the Black diaspora. “Historically, black working class culture has largely been experienced internationally through the lens of hip-hop. On *More Life*, Drake shifts from that perspective, (happily) disrupting the U.S. dominance of how the black experience is represented in western pop culture” (Yates). International markets such as Canada, England, and the Caribbean Islands have cultivated their own Hip- Hop communities, stylistic sound and stories but these markets have never captivated the primary attention of popular culture in

the United States. Artists, such as Drake, incorporate Toronto lingo with Caribbean dancehall melodies and British lyrical energy to create a totally new global sound (Morgan 143). Other genres have also started to be included into new music like Latin Pop, Rock n Roll, Disco and others. Not everyone supports this movement, particularly in the case of Drake, as some see this incorporation as cultural appropriation. However, in music history, fusion is seen as a natural progression in the rise and fall of genres (Alridge et. al). Regardless, album such as this speaks to the complexity and inclusivity of the genre.

Despite of all the changes, some artists chose to embody an introspective essence that has its roots in the sound of past decades. Under the mentorship of Jay-Z , producer and rapper Jermaine Cole (J. Cole) from Fayetteville, North Carolina has challenged social consciousness with his music. His albums *2014 Forest Hill Drive* (2014) and *4 Your Eyez Only* (2017) were both commercial successes, selling 1 million units respectively (certified 1X Platinum), while engaging topics ranging from police brutality, social inequality, the beauty of family, love, and empowerment for black Americans. Another artist leading the new school of woke rappers, hailing from Compton, Los Angeles in California is Kendrick Lamar. A prodigy of the 1990s West Coast Gangsta music, Kendrick Lamar has worked closely with Dr. Dre while signed to Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE). His albums *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (2012) and *Section.80* (2011) depict the harsh realities of growing up in south central California in the early 2000s while the albums *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and *DAMN* (2017) show Lemar's music versatility and lyrical prowess in conveying a message of hope in the black community. His catalogue has earned him 7 Grammy Awards

and recognition from the mayor of Compton Aja Brown and even former United States President Barack Obama for his humanitarian mission for “Purpose, Prosperity and Progress” (Legaspi). Many other artists such as Big K.R.I.T., Rapsody, Joey Badass, Run the Jewels and others also contribute their voices to pushing socially conscious music.

In aggregate, even though “Mumble Rap” may receive the spotlight as it sits on the crossroads between pop and rap, the Hip-Hop genre has given room to many different themes, ideas, and styles. In fact, Hip-Hop has grown to incorporate a flourishing “Christian Hip-Hop” chapter. Artist such as TobyMac and Lecrae who choose to use their music to spread the message and word of Christ to their fans have enjoyed successful careers within Hip-Hop. The sounds and styles of the 1980s and 1990s may not be readily heard in this modern era, however the beauty lies in the fact that, whatever style you do prefer, it is represented by modern artists.

**Closing**

“Ayyo, I remember Marvin Gaye, used to sing to me  
He had me feelin' like black was tha thing to be  
And suddenly the ghetto didn't seem so tough  
And though we had it rough, we always had enough  
I huffed and puffed about my curfew and broke the rules  
Ran with the local crew, and had a smoke or two  
And I realize momma really paid the price, she nearly gave her life, to raise  
me right, And all I had to give her was my pipe dream  
Of how I'd rock the mic, and make it to tha bright screen, I'm tryin' to make a  
dollar out of fifteen cents, It's hard to be legit and still pay your rent, And in the end  
it seems I'm headin' for tha pen, I try and find my friends, but they're blowin' in the  
wind, Last night my buddy lost his whole family, It's gonna take the man in me to  
conquer this insanity, It seems tha rain'll never let up I try to keep my head up, and  
still keep from gettin' wet up you know it's funny when it rains it pours  
They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor  
Said it ain't no hope for the youth and the truth is It ain't no hope for tha  
future, And then they wonder why we crazy  
I blame my mother, for turning my brother into a crack baby, We ain't meant  
to survive, 'cause it's a setup, And even though you're fed up, ya got to keep your...  
Keep ya head up, ooh, child, things are gonna get easier  
Keep ya head up, ooh, child, things'll get brighter”

- *Keep Your Head Up* - Tupac Shakur 1993



Hip Hop and the culture it has created, encompasses a beautiful tapestry of diversity. Through the generations, the genre has been given room to grow and likewise has expanded to house many different voices and messages. During the genres inception, many of the themes were a direct result of the society and individuals pioneering the art form. Mainstream popularity has given allowed more voices and artistic points of view into the sound of the genre and as a result subgenres such as Mumble Rap have flourished as the modern era of Hip-Hop thrives on creativity. Some would say that the popularization of such a subgenre is detrimental for the trajectory of the craft as it marks a separation and progression from the true essence of what Hip-Hop stands for. Others, such as myself, and other modern artists such as Belly disagree. "I appreciate and love every facet of hip-hop and everything that's going on right now in the game... We've had different genres within our genre for so long that people just fail to realize that it's going to keep repeating" (Belly CNN). The fact that new subgenres are able spring forth within Hip-Hop, specifically those that not everyone is able to relate to when listening, speaks the overall strength of the genre. Outside of mumble rap, this has driven an increase of experimentation, expansion, and mastery of Hip-Hop as a musical art form. The best modern artists, such J-Cole and Kendrick Lamar, fuse stylistic characteristics from modern rap with past generation to drive traditional rap into the future at a high level. Kendrick Lamar, for instance, was just awarded the *2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Music* for his 2017 album *Damn.*, becoming the first non-jazz or orchestra based work to win the prize. Lastly, and most importantly, artists to this day still utilize Hip-Hop to drive social-consciousness and change as was done

in the 1980s and 1990s. Kid Cudi's album *Man on the Moon: The End of Day* released in 2009, dove into themes of mental illness, depression, suicidal thoughts and is seen by many millennial listeners as a beacon of hope for individuals that struggle with the same issues. In addition, Macklemore & Ryan Lewis' *Same Love* was able to garner social awareness to Gay and Lesbian rights in 2012. The essence of Hip-Hop lives on with artists and messages such as these that go on to have impact in individual's lives. Hip-Hop was never intended to be genre or one singular idea that all generations had to conform to. Today, more so than ever, Hip-Hop influences many different people in various ways. Eventually a day will come where the genre is surpassed by the latest music trend, as is music history, however today Hip-Hop is still alive.

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